

Male students: engagement with academic and pastoral support services



Equality Challenge Unit

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1 Introduction

Despite considerable research into boys' experiences and attainment in schools, little research has been undertaken in a higher education context.

While recognising that women are often disadvantaged in comparison to men, this research was commissioned by Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) in light of emerging differences in participation, retention and attainment between undergraduate male and female students in higher education. It investigates patterns of male and female undergraduate engagement with services that have been found to improve student retention and attainment.

1.1 The emerging differences

Participation

Men are less likely to commence an undergraduate course than women since the early 1990s. In 2009/10, the participation gap between male and female students was 13.3% (ECU, 2011: figure 1.6).

Retention

Men are less likely to complete their degrees than women. 8.9% of men who registered for a first degree in 2008/09 withdrew during their first year in comparison to 7.1% of women (ECU, 2011: 12).

There is a greater gender gap in completion rates for mature undergraduate students (those aged 21 or over on entry to higher education) than those aged under 21:

- = 7.9% of male undergraduates and 6.5% of female undergraduates aged under 21 on entry to higher education do not complete their degrees
- = 17.0% of male mature undergraduates and 12.3% of female mature undergraduates withdraw from their studies

(HEPI, 2009: table 5)

Attainment

Male students are more likely to attain a 2:2 or a third class degree than female students. In 2009/10 40.5% of male students attained a third or 2:2, against 35.1% of female students. (ECU, 2011: 13).

1.2 Improving retention and success through support services

A number of research studies (Action on Access, 2003; Jones, 2008; Dodgson and Bolam, 2002; Thomas *et al*, 2002) have identified the positive contribution that academic and pastoral services make to student experience, retention and success.

ECU and the Higher Education Academy found that the mentoring and personal support for students provided by some higher education institutions (HEIs) were seen to be particularly relevant for minority ethnic students and male students aged under 21 who are considered 'at risk' of disengagement (ECU and HEA, 2008: 17).

Little is known about the uptake of support services, although there is some evidence that students from lower socio-economic groups and 'non-traditional' students may access them less often (Dodgson and Bolam, 2002; Engle and Tinto, 2008; Hills, 2003), despite the important role that these services, such as study skills workshops, can have in supporting such groups (Action on Access, 2003; ECU and HEA, 2008).

1.3 Gendered engagement

Following research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation on combating working class dropout from higher education, the former Equal Opportunities Commission recommended that HEIs 'look at whether men are accessing student support services, and consider how these services could be delivered to meet men's needs' (EOC, 2007). However, only limited research has been undertaken into gendered use of academic and pastoral support services up to now.

From this previous research, it has been found that:

- = women report greater need of, interest in, and use of such services than men (Stock *et al*, 2001)
- = male students were less aware than female students of opportunities for self-development, such as careers counselling and out-of-class assistance, and valued them less highly (Grebennikov and Skaines, 2009)
- = women rated academic and personal support and development services to be more important than their male peers did, while men placed greater importance on gaining employment skills (Anastasia *et al*, 1999)

-
- = women were more likely to apply for, receive, and respond to extra-curricular academic tuition and financial support (Angrist *et al*, 2006)
 - = The Higher Education Retention and Engagement (HERE) project found that female students express more anxiety and are more likely to consider leaving university than men, but are still less likely to leave (HERE Project, 2012). Evidence from an HEA discussion paper concludes that 'female students may be more aware that they are experiencing problems, or perhaps perceive problems where male students do not. Given the increased likelihood of male students actually withdrawing, it appeared that male students were simply unaware that they were facing problems or at risk of failing' (HEA, 2011; see also Foster *et al*, 2012).

There is also evidence to suggest gendered differences in engagement more widely. For example studies have found that key barriers to the improvement of male undergraduate results include:

- = lower attendance rates of taught sessions than female students
- = lower submission rates of non-contributory assessments than female students
- = higher amounts of socialising than female students
- = higher levels of reported general disengagement than female students

(Woodfield *et al*, 2006; see also Hofman and van der Berg, 2000; Reisberg, 2000; Wintre and Yaffe, 2000)

To some extent, elements of the gendered patterns around engagement are unsurprising given patterns of access to, and use of, services outside the higher education context, such as health support services (Bendelow *et al*, 2001).

Studies have shown that some men resist expressing emotion or needs, develop fewer social ties than women, and specifically fear revealing educational limitations (Mark *et al*, 2010; King and O'Driscoll, 2002). Research also suggests that this is mirrored in education, where men have been found to seek help and support less often than women (Mark *et al*, 2010; McGivney, 2004).

1.4 Aims of this research

This research aimed to provide a robust evidence base to develop understanding about patterns of male and female undergraduate engagement with the following services:

- = careers and employability services including volunteering
- = student advisers, counselling and wellbeing services
- = disability services
- = financial support and advice
- = IT skills and support
- = library services
- = support for religion or belief
- = study skills support as part of timetabled sessions and also study support beyond timetabled sessions – including support from academic advisers, personal tutors, student mentoring schemes, and centrally supplied academic development services including research, writing, revision, assessment, and time management workshops
- = students' union services

It considers whether there is a gendered pattern of how services are experienced – what motivates the user, how satisfied they are by the service provided, and what impact service use has on overall experience, as well as retention, completion and achievement. This study does not intend to generalise about men and women, nor does it suggest that any gendered patterns found are the result of fixed or innate differences.

The research also explored intersections with other characteristics – such as age, ethnicity and whether students are the first in their family to attend university or not – as well as course factors, such as differences between disciplines.

2 Research overview

Seven HEIs were selected to participate in the research on the basis of their location, mission group, disciplinary and programme range, size and availability of data on academic and pastoral support service use.

The research included:

- = **service-use data** for the full range of academic and pastoral support examined in this study for 2009/10, which was analysed to establish what, if any, gender differences exist in relation to service use
- = **an online survey**, tailored to each HEI, to elicit quantitative and qualitative data on male and female student awareness, use and experience of pastoral and academic support services in their institution (4053 surveys were completed)
- = **student focus groups and individual student interviews** to elicit qualitative data on students' motivation for using services and their experience of service use (five all-female focus groups and five all-male focus groups were completed with 47 students)
- = **service-provider interviews** were conducted by local research associates and were designed to elicit qualitative data on providers' general understanding of any observable gender differences within use of their service (17 interviews took place)

2.1 Availability of service-use data

Across the participating HEIs there were inconsistencies in data collection and disaggregation by gender for service use. In some cases the relevant information did not exist, was not collated, or was collated by individual functions rather than centrally (eg within counselling services and for internal use only).

'We've never done any real research. We do evaluation every year in different ways about who has used the service more and how we can improve the service, that kind of quality evaluation. But again we've never analysed the stats from a gender perspective. I guess we ought to. It's a time element really. And also high quality management information that you can pull out and profile really quickly.'

Service provider

'We did at one point have a database when we were more of a department but then there was a big restructure so it's not [available], unfortunately.'

Service provider

Data was collected to different protocols; some services recorded only all appointments booked, whereas others recorded all contact with students.

Service-use data from institutions

M = % male F = % female * gender not declared † combined figures for 2006–09	All undergraduates		Advising		Financial		Counselling		Careers		Academic		Disability	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Edge Hill University	25	75	–	–	34	66	30	70	29	71	–	–	31	69
University of the Highlands and Islands	45	55	–	–	17	83	–	–	39	61	–	–	32	68
King's College London	37	63	40	60	40	60	28	72	–	–	–	–	31 [†]	69 [†]
Queen's University, Belfast	42	58	35	65	–	–	34	66	–	–	29	71	34	66
University of Sussex	42	58	42	58	36	64	31	69	37	63	–	–	44	56
University of Wales Institute, Cardiff	49	51	33	67	33	67	28	72	37	63	44	56	36*	59*
University of the West of Scotland	36	64	–	–	33	67	32	68	–	–	–	–	–	–
University of Portsmouth	54	46	–	–	–	–	40	60	–	–	28	72	61	39

Some providers were unaware that data had been collected (even where it had been made available to this project). In cases where they were aware of such data, providers most frequently reported that it is usually reviewed only on an annual basis and treated as less of a priority for review and response than data relating to other characteristics such as age, disability and discipline background. Participants cited a lack of time and a lack of formal requirement to report the data to other parties (eg via committee structures) as reasons for insufficient data analysis.

Some service providers talked anecdotally about differential rates of service use by men and women. In these cases, impressions were sometimes at odds with the available evidence.

2.2 Survey respondents

There were 4053 survey respondents. 31% were men and 69% were women.

Survey respondents by gender

	Student population			Survey respondents		
	Number	% male	% female	Number	% male	% female
Edge Hill University	24,000	25	75	886	24	76
University of the Highlands and Islands	8,000	45	55	254	28	72
King's College London	23,000	37	63	517	31	69
Queen's University, Belfast	17,000	42	58	571	32	68
University of Sussex	12,000	42	58	782	32	68
University of Wales Institute, Cardiff	11,000	49	51	924	36	64
University of the West of Scotland	20,000	36	64	119	33	67

Male respondents were more likely than female respondents to:

- = come from families categorised as being part of standard occupational classes 1 and 2, ie from 'managers and senior officials' and 'professional occupations'
- = be international students
- = be in the first year of their degree

Male respondents were less likely than female respondents to:

- = be first generation higher education students
- = be reading an arts degree
- = be white
- = have a religious belief
- = be heterosexual
- = report having dependent children

Background characteristics and gender of survey respondents

Background characteristics		% of men	% of women
First generation higher education student		53	58
Parent in standard occupational class 1 and 2 ('managers and senior officials' and 'professional occupations')		59	52
International student		11	4
Pre-entry qualifications	A-levels, highers, vocational qualifications	36	38
	Access course	4	7
	Degree or higher level	17	13
Mature student		40	39
Arts student		56	67
Declared disability		9	10
White ethnic group		76	86
Religious belief		56	60
Heterosexual		79	85
Caring responsibilities	Dependent children	8	14
	Other dependent	5	5

3 General findings

3.1 Students' views on their health, study habits, work and extra-curricular involvement

Male students were more likely than female students to:

- = describe their health as 'very good' or 'good'
- = take part in extra-curricular activities associated with the university, such as being a member of a sports team or club

Male students were less likely than female students to:

- = undertake paid work
- = spend more than 20 hours per week studying

Students' views on their health and behaviour from survey data

		% of men	% of women
Health	Very good	52	47
	Good	42	43
	Fair	5	8
	Bad	1	1
	Very bad	0	0
Total hours studying per week (timetabled sessions and self study)	10 or under	13	11
	11–20 hours	35	30
	21–30 hours	27	28
	31–40 hours	15	20
	41–50 hours	5	8
	Over 50 hours	5	5
Paid work	No paid work	55	47
	Paid – under 15 hours	25	32
	Paid – over 15 hours	20	21
Extra-curricular engagement	Students' union club	24	21
	Sports team/club	25	15
	Student representative	15	12
	Volunteering	12	13
	Students' union social support/ group	11	8
	Other	8	7

3.2 Students' views on their need for academic and pastoral support

Female students were more likely than male students to report that they had considered withdrawing from their studies, although slightly less likely to have done so 'frequently'.

Students' reported on-course challenges and need for services by gender from survey data

		% of men	% of women
Considered withdrawing	No	64	57
	Yes – once or twice	24	30
	Yes – more than once or twice	7	10
	Yes – frequently	5	4
Expressed current need of services	Academic support	40	44
	Pastoral support	13	15
	Financial support	31	32
Anticipated future use of services		54	60

Qualitative responses to the survey indicated that the main reasons for considering withdrawing from studies for both men and women were problems relating to their course:

- = students' ability to manage the workload
- = course content, organisation or delivery that made studying difficult, such as a dislike of the subject being studied or the quality of the teaching

Men were less likely than women to cite workload pressure as a reason for their having considered withdrawing (21% in comparison to 28% of women). However, they were more likely to cite problems relating to the course itself as a reason for considering withdrawing (29% in comparison to 27% of women).

The majority of both male (54%) and female (60%) students anticipated using services in the future.

Male students who studied for fewer than ten hours per week were more likely to consider withdrawing, and more likely to assess themselves as being in need of pastoral support services (18%) than other male students (13%). However, they were much less likely to anticipate using university services than other groups of men, with only 39% of them predicting future use.

3.3 Awareness of support services

Students' knowledge about specific services was often vague and their awareness of a particular service was sometimes arrived at by chance. Students find out about services from:

- = friends
- = the institution's website
- = advertising by services
- = referral, including needs assessment
- = induction
- = lecturers and personal tutors
- = mentor training

Most students, if not all, will have received information about these services at induction, but the findings from the student focus groups indicate that this information was not always retained.

Male students who participated in the research were generally less aware than female students of all services. Their awareness of services also varied depending on other factors, such as age, ethnicity, sexual orientation and hours of study undertaken per week.

- = Male students aged under 21 were more likely to be aware of services than mature male students (those over the age of 21 when starting their studies).
- = White men generally reported greater awareness of a range of services than black or Asian men (see the service-specific findings for more detail).
- = Heterosexual male students were less likely to be aware of most services than those who identified as gay, bisexual or other sexual orientation.
- = Both part-time and full-time male students who spend less than ten hours a week studying were less likely to be aware of every available service than other male students.

3.4 Use of services

The majority of survey respondents had accessed at least one service. However, many services had low levels of use by students.

Male survey respondents used most services less than female respondents. Within men as a group, there were differences in service use depending on age, ethnicity and sexual orientation.

- = Male students under the age of 21 were less likely to use counselling, study support as part of timetabled sessions, study support beyond timetabled sessions and IT support and skills than mature students.
- = Heterosexual men were more likely to use student mentoring than students who identified as gay, bisexual or other but were slightly less likely to use the library, money advisers, counsellors or IT services.
- = There were differences in service use by ethnicity (see the service-specific findings for more detail).

Hours spent studying per week as a factor in service use

Male students who study for fewer than ten hours per week were much less likely to use most services than other male students, however, they were slightly more likely to use counselling services. Similarly, female students who study for fewer than ten hours per week were less likely to use services than other female students, but were more likely to access services than men in the low-hours group.

Generally use of services increased with the number of hours studied per week, although for some pastoral services it tailed off again when students are studying for more than 50 hours per week. The low-hours group were also less likely than students studying more hours to be engaged with institutionally based, extra-curricular activities such as students' union activities and sports clubs; 59% of students in this group were arts students.

The low-hours group was not characterised by background features that we might associate with disadvantage in the higher education context. A larger proportion of male students in the low-hours group (25%) worked for more than 15 hours per week than other male students (21%). However, they were less likely to

have dependent children, more likely to have come from families where both parents had graduated, and less likely to be first generation students (47% compared with 54% of other men). Furthermore, 51% of them came from a home where a parent worked in an occupation that fell into the standard occupational classes 1 and 2.

This group of male students were twice as likely as other male students to declare that they considered withdrawing ‘frequently’ (9% compared with 4% of other men), and were more likely to feel they need pastoral support, although they were less likely to express a need for academic or financial support.

3.5 Seeking support

Of those who had considered withdrawing from their studies, men were less likely than women to report accessing university services to help them resolve their issues. When male respondents were asked what helped them to stay at university, only 24% cited support from their HEI’s services and from their tutors, compared with 32% of women – 10% of men and 18% of women reported that support from tutors, in particular, had helped them to stay on the course.

Men were also less likely to cite that support from other students, friends and family had helped them to stay on their course (23% of men compared with 35% of women). Men were more likely to say that personal determination – or the personal goal of completing the degree – prevented them from leaving (26% compared with 20% of women). They were also more likely to cite the money that they had already invested in their higher education as the reason for persisting – 10% men cited this as against 5% women.

Who students go to first

Focus group and student interview data indicated that some male students prefer support from informal contacts and networks, including friends and family, rather than formal support offered by their institutions.

‘[If an issue is] more personal, talk to your friends on the course rather than some random worker.’

Male student

'I think males tend to band together and gain support from their peers, not necessarily in an emotional sense, but by having a closeness, like a brotherhood. Which I felt we developed ... at the end of the third year and it feels like you've got support there and you don't need to approach tutors about issues.'

Male student

Women also frequently cited close friendship groups that could be relied upon to provide support. Some indicated that they would always prefer to seek support from family and friends first, or from a wider range of individuals and fellow students, which may include informal academic tutoring and guidance.

'I wanted to change subject and I went to go and speak to someone but they said to me because I had missed the interview [associated with an application to change course] I had to do it the following year and obviously that wasn't an option for me so I ended up continuing anyway ... I did get some support from my academic tutor but I don't think it was a lot, I think the main reason I managed to do second year was because of [another student in the room] because obviously she understood more than I did. She helped me through most of my second year.'

Female student

Willingness to contact institutional services for support

Support from friends did not preclude female students' attempts to seek support through formal institutional channels. Female students were more likely than male students to seek support from a range of people and services. Generally, female students appeared to be more comfortable with the process of seeking support and they had greater expectations of a good level of support than male students did.

'There is more academic support but it's like you [need to] feel comfy going to [it] ... But I offload to everyone, so everyone knows my business. So I do get a lot of personal support.'

Female student

'Girls are more comfortable asking for help, I don't know why.'

Male student

Male students were more likely to try to avoid contact with support staff even when they recognised the need for support.

'Maybe I have had the need, but I've got around it in different ways, talking to a lot of people on the course, things like that. I mean I sometimes email tutors, things like that. But ... I just seem to get away without actually going to see anyone ... I don't really like it ... I don't think I've struggled too much. But I wouldn't want to do it unless I really needed it.'

Male student

Male students were less likely to seek out alternative help if support was sought, and proved to be unsatisfactory or did not solve issues.

'Because I've got bipolar I was going to register myself as disabled and try to get as much support as I could. But the problem was they gave me a massive form. I had a meeting with them and they said "no problem, take the form away and fill it in". I just don't get on with forms if I'm being honest, just never got round to filling it in.'

Male student

Female students were more willing to take a discursive approach to development and support, and to see the process of accessing support itself as beneficial, whereas men preferred to identify a problem and then seek a solution.

'I think men much more want a solution. There's a problem and they want an answer. A much more linear approach where I think ... female students would probably prefer much more the process, the dialogue. They like the discussion, they like the journey, they like the process of it all.'

Service provider

Possible reasons for male disengagement with services

There was some suggestion from the focus groups and student interviews that men's reluctance to utilise services was related to their age and maturity.

'Even though in this room today it sounds like a lot of people have used [the service], I don't know if that represents males in general ... I think the younger ones, the younger males that I've known, tend not to use them. Don't know why. Whereas the girls, they use them more.'

Male student

'I'm a mature student, you're a mature student ... you have risked a lot coming back to university or coming to university for the first time in my case, but I think I always need reassurance ... I have learned to go and sort that out because if I don't I could waste a lot of time, I either get the help or I don't know what I'm doing.'

Male student

The information from male students indicates that, perhaps with the exception of older male students, men are less keen than women to proactively access services. Several service providers reported that the numbers of men using services increased when robust staff referral processes were in place. Even in the context of non-academic services, such as financial support, men appeared to be more reluctant to self-refer, and more likely to wait for an additional prompt by being referred by a member of staff.

'If their course is being affected by lack of money, in that ... they're working so many hours, from time to time lecturers will refer them to us ... for advice ... More males come to us through that route than females ... females are more likely to self-refer but males may wait for that additional prompt.'

Service provider

Service providers suggested that men may find identifying with 'equalities issues' less comfortable than women and may not have accessed some services on this basis.

'If they have a problem that was related to equalities I don't think they would come, you know, they wouldn't necessarily put their finger on it and come to me ... I think that they might not associate equality and diversity with their particular issue.'

Service provider

Findings from the student focus groups and interviews indicated that men were less likely than women to explicitly seek support. Some men were concerned that doing so might be perceived as displaying vulnerability which was generally recognised to be a product of socialisation.

'Maybe I don't like to ask for help ... I guess it is a pattern. Before coming here I did A-levels on a distance learning course ... I did it all from a textbook ... so there was no one to ask for help then, and it's just the way I do it.'

Male student

'Due to stress and family disruptions I had a nightmare of a time and I found it very difficult to ask for help ... I refused any help offered and have regretted it ever since ... That was a key issue for me, I think. Feeling isolated but at the same time refusing to become a burden. As men we feel we're socially expected to cope and that, I think, causes us to hesitate when needing help. We avoid small embarrassments but end up making bigger mistakes because of it.'

Male student

'[Tutors'] view is that 'you should know that', but if I don't, I don't. I wouldn't ask if I knew ... It's put me off, I don't ask tutors. I don't go to any sessions on offer.'

Male student

Female students did not commonly link seeking help with vulnerability or a lack of resources to manage educational or personal lives. Many were clear that building effective, supportive relationships with staff was itself a resource that enabled them to be as successful as they could be.

Service providers agreed that some men felt less comfortable than women with one-to-one provision which could even lead to men refusing support that they needed.

'I think [men] are more particular, for instance, if note-taker ... support is recommended, sometimes we have to reassure them that ... they can negotiate with the facilitator to meet at times convenient to them outside the classroom, they don't have to sit together, they don't have to go together socially.'

Service provider

Much of the commentary from students and service providers suggested that men would benefit from better engagement with support services. Some service providers suggested that men were being clearly disadvantaged by not seeking support early enough and by not fully engaging with it.

Generally speaking, men were more likely to feel comfortable engaging with services that were 'necessary' and that could offer a targeted response, if this was required.

The stage at which students consider using services

Qualitative data from service providers suggested that female students were likely to seek support earlier than male students.

'You get the first lot of freshers ... men and women, but ... slightly more women I think because the men are less willing to say 'I've just been sitting in my room and I miss my mum', whereas the girls will come along and say that. We get quite a few people [the final exam period] who now say, at least the men, 'I've completely blown this year, I haven't done any work, I don't know what I'm going to do, I feel really terrible'. Again I think it is men and women, but probably more men ... they go into denial more.'

Service provider

Service providers suggested that women were happy to come and talk about how they were feeling, regardless of whether they had a specific problem, whereas men were more likely to wait until they had a significant problem, which may, by the time of an appointment, have become a crisis and intense provision is required to resolve the student's issue.

'Women use the service more effectively than males ... we've got statistics to back that up.'

Service provider

Fewer male students than female students sought support from their HEIs when they were considering withdrawing from their studies.

However, these findings also indicate that most men who accessed services felt that they had done so in a timely manner, an understanding that is challenged by some service provider and student qualitative comment which indicates that earlier male engagement would be optimal.

Students' views on whether they sought help or advice at the right time

	% men	% women
Yes, I got advice/help/support at the right time	72	70
No, I should have sought advice/help/support earlier	20	25
No, I should have sought advice/help/support much earlier	8	5

Male students who spend fewer than ten hours studying per week were the least likely to say that they had sought support 'at the right time'.

3.6 Opinions of services

Male students were less likely than female students to rate services that they had accessed as 'excellent' or 'good'.

The majority of service users confirmed a positive impact, but male students' opinions were lower than female students'.

Service providers said that student evaluations of services were infrequently examined for gender differences. Where evaluation data was collected and analysed by gender, it indicated that the group that was least likely to experience a positive impact of service use was male students between the ages of 18 and 25.

4 Service-specific findings

4.1 Careers and employability including volunteering

Students' awareness, use and opinion of the careers service from survey responses

		% male students					% female students
		white	black	Asian	other	all	
Aware of service		62	45	62	79	61	63
Use service	Never	62	68	48	62	62	60
	Rarely					18	17
	Occasionally					17	20
	Frequently					4	4
Rate service to be excellent or good						60	62
Consider service to have a positive impact						73	74

Although differences in men's and women's awareness and use of careers services and employability was marginal, there were differences in service usage by broad ethnic grouping. Men from Asian backgrounds were far more likely to use careers and employment services than all other broad ethnic categories.

4.2 Counselling, advice and wellbeing

Students' awareness, use and opinion of the counselling service from survey responses

		% male students					% female students
		white	black	Asian	other	all	
Aware of service		54	36	45	66	52	59
Use service	Never	90	77	66	79	86	83
	Rarely					7	7
	Occasionally					5	8
	Frequently					2	3
Rate service to be excellent or good						38	46
Consider service to have a positive impact						53	63

Students' awareness, use and opinion of advice and wellbeing services from survey responses

		% male students	% female students
Aware of service		41	41
Use service	Never	82	83
	Rarely	10	9
	Occasionally	7	7
	Frequently	2	2
Rate service to be excellent or good		48	50
Consider service to have a positive impact		63	71

'I was quite surprised today with people mentioning counselling and stuff. I don't think it's very well advertised. I had no idea about any of that, no idea at all ... probably just used my personal tutor in that kind of way.'

Female student

Only at one HEI did male students use the advice service more frequently than female students. At another HEI, women outnumbered men in all recorded ways of initiating contact with advice services that normally rely on proactive self-referral but men far outnumbered women where contact was made 'through outreach activities'. Having made contact with advisers, male and female students were seen equally often and for similar amounts of time per session. Men were less likely to refer themselves for a counselling appointment than women, but were more likely to be referred by tutors, GPs and friends.

Analysis of service-use data at one HEI revealed that the proportion of male students accessing advice services was equal to the proportion of men in the student population as a whole. However, gender differences were evident in terms of the reasons stated for accessing advisers (further breakdown in the table below):

- = 40% of women and 31% of men accessed advisers because they were in search of general academic support and guidance
- = 39% of men and 27% of women sought help for progression issues, including failure to complete the year for academic reasons and voluntary withdrawal

In this HEI, service providers stated that students accessed services in relation to progression issues when they feared failure or had failed an element of their course. Where this is the case, students are often referred to the advice centre by others. In contrast, students seeking general academic support are more likely to self-refer and to seek help in relation to a specific aspect of their studies that is of concern.

Further analysis by subject area did not indicate significant differences. Across both arts and science courses, women were significantly more likely to seek advice and support in relation to their academic study, whereas men were more likely to seek advice and support for progression issues.

Service use data 2009/10 from one HEI: main reason for approaching the student advice service by gender

Reason	% of men	% of women
Academic	31	40
Disability	2	2
Finance	8	6
Health	10	12
Personal	8	11
Attainment	39	27
Other	2	2

Most male students who participated in this research did not indicate a preference for support for personal issues. Only 2% cited counselling as the most helpful support service compared with 8% of female students.

'The staff trained to counsel ... didn't judge me and were open and caring and honest.'

Male student

4.3 Disability services

Students' awareness, use and opinion of disability services from survey responses

		% male students					% female students
		white	black	Asian	other	all	
Aware of service		46	21	35	45	43	48
Use service	Never	91	89	92	79	91	90
	Rarely					4	3
	Occasionally					3	4
	Frequently					3	4
Rate service to be excellent or good						36	42
Consider service to have a positive impact						44	60

Overall men were slightly less aware of disability services than women however black men were substantially less aware of disability services than other male ethnic groupings. Black male students had the lowest awareness levels for the majority of academic and pastoral support services compared with other ethnic groupings.

4.4 Financial support and advice

Students' awareness, use and opinion of the financial support service from survey responses

		% male students					% female students
		white	black	Asian	other	all	
Aware of service		70	45	53	72	66	73
Use service	Never	64	72	78	48	66	60
	Rarely					11	10
	Occasionally					13	17
	Frequently					10	14
Rate service to be excellent or good						60	67
Consider service to have a positive impact						76	82

Students' awareness, use and opinion of the financial advice service from survey responses

		% male students					% female students
		white	black	Asian	other	all	
Aware of service		51	26	28	52	46	48
Use service	Never	87	85	87	76	86	85
	Rarely					9	9
	Occasionally					4	5
	Frequently					1	1
Rate service to be excellent or good						42	42
Consider service to have a positive impact						50	65

Data provided by one HEI reflecting the application and award rates of undergraduate male and female students to its access to learning funds shows that women applied for the fund more frequently and received more awards (64% of students securing funds). Another HEI confirmed that women accounted for a slightly elevated proportion of awards from general support funds (67%), but that they accounted for 95% of awards from childcare funds.

12% of male survey respondents and 13% of female survey respondents valued financial support as the most useful service.

Male students with a parent who works within standard occupational classes 1 or 2 (ie from 'managers and senior official' or 'professional occupations') were less likely to access financial support than other male students.

4.5 IT skills and support

Students' awareness, use and opinion of IT skills and support from survey responses

		% male students					% female students
		white	black	Asian	other	all	
Aware of service		60	72	62	66	60	61
Use service	Never	63	28	39	55	59	57
	Rarely					19	20
	Occasionally					15	17
	Frequently					8	6
Rate service to be excellent or good						67	72
Consider service to have a positive impact						84	85

10% of male and female survey respondents rated IT support as the most useful service.

4.6 Library services

Students' awareness, use and opinion of library services from survey responses

		% male students					% female students
		white	black	Asian	other	all	
Aware of service		72	72	67	76	71	78
Use service	Never	25	17	22	24	25	19
	Rarely					11	9
	Occasionally					24	23
	Frequently					40	49
Rate service to be excellent or good						84	85
Consider service to have a positive impact						76	94

A smaller proportion of men felt that the library had had a positive impact on them than rated it as 'excellent' or 'good' indicating that their engagement with this service, rather than the service itself, may have been problematic.

Beyond the benefit of access to publications and the accommodating workspace offered, libraries were seen as highly useful because of the structured academic support services on offer and the valued expertise of staff. 45% of male survey respondents and 38% of female respondents rated the library as the most useful service.

'Normally they don't talk using jargon, clichés or 'sound bites' and tend to provide specific help, unlike [another service].'

Male survey respondent

Data from one HEI's library records on entrances and loans between 2008 and 2010 indicated both gender and disciplinary differences in library use. Accounting for the overall proportion of men within the student body, male students entered the library more frequently than female students but borrowed fewer books. Their borrowing rates tended to be proportionately lower across all disciplines. For example:

Subject	% of male students within subject	% of male students' borrowing within subject area
Biochemistry	45	41
Informatics	87	81
Economics	65	50
History	48	44

86% of books borrowed were from arts subjects. This perhaps reflects the greater likelihood of accessing journal articles online for scientific disciplines. Subject area difference therefore provides a significant part, although not all, of the explanation as to why men's overall library borrowing rates were disproportionately lower than women's.

4.7 Religion or belief support

Students' awareness, use and opinion of religion and belief services from survey responses

		% male students					% female students
		white	black	Asian	other	all	
Aware of service		35	38	37	38	35	36
Use service	Never	92	89	80	86	90	90
	Rarely					5	5
	Occasionally					3	4
	Frequently					2	2
Rate service to be excellent or good						34	36
Consider service to have a positive impact						44	58

White men generally reported greater awareness of a range of services than black or Asian men. However, black male students were more aware of services supporting religion and belief and men from Asian backgrounds were more likely to access services supporting religion and belief. There was a significant difference between men and women in relation to whether they believed the religion and belief support services they accessed had a positive impact on them.

'I only just found out recently there's a prayer room. I suppose being a Muslim, I'm in a minority here ... so I kind of assumed that there probably wouldn't be much available, because I didn't see it advertised. I thought the university would be more signposted. It's only chance someone in one of the offices said "do you know there's a prayer room?" Maybe the fault is my own.'

Male student

4.8 Study support

Students' awareness, use and opinion of study support within timetabled sessions from survey responses

		% male students					% female students
		white	black	Asian	other	all	
Aware of service		49	34	51	41	48	53
Use service	Never	68	62	44	66	65	61
	Rarely					13	13
	Occasionally					15	18
	Frequently					7	8
Rate service to be excellent or good						61	66
Consider service to have a positive impact						77	83

Students' awareness, use and opinion of study support outside timetabled sessions from survey responses

		% male students					% female students
		white	black	Asian	other	all	
Aware of service		49	40	46	38	47	53
Use service	Never	59	45	45	69	57	49
	Rarely					16	15
	Occasionally					20	27
	Frequently					7	11
Rate service to be excellent or good						70	76
Consider service to have a positive impact						82	90

Students' awareness, use and opinion of student mentoring from survey responses

		% male students					% female students
		white	black	Asian	other	all	
Aware of service		33	25	36	35	32	34
Use service	Never	85	74	71	83	83	85
	Rarely					8	8
	Occasionally					7	5
	Frequently					3	3
Rate service to be excellent or good						47	52
Consider service to have a positive impact						68	72

Students' awareness, use and opinion of web-based study support from survey responses

Web-based study support		% male students	% female students
Aware of service		56	56
Use service	Never	40	37
	Rarely	10	11
	Occasionally	18	19
	Frequently	39	34
Rate service to be excellent or good		70	74
Consider service to have a positive impact		86	89

56% of respondents used web-based study support, where available. 49% of respondents used study support outside timetabled sessions.

Male respondents used academic support significantly less than female respondents. Women were 11% more likely to use study support provided by their faculty outside timetabled sessions 'occasionally' or 'frequently'.

14% of male survey respondents and 19% of female survey respondents valued support from tutors as the most useful service. Women were more likely to credit this support as playing a key role in their retention and success, however several male respondents also appreciated the support available.

'I found the personal tutors most useful as they have helped me with a range of different issues and are always available to see me.'

Female student

'I have found that [help from personal tutors] covers a wide range of services in one go ... it is brilliant when you are behind, having personal problems or just need some help. I highly recommend it.'

Male student

'The one-to-one aspect is much more personal and questions can be answered.'

Male student

Some female students described unsuccessful attempts to engage with their personal tutor, however these responses were in the minority. Men were more likely to consider tutors to be 'remote' and 'unapproachable', and consequently did not engage with them. Male students were also more likely to disengage from tutorial support, and, on occasion, any support, if their initial contact was unhelpful.

'While some students have very good personal tutors, mine has been extremely poor, not replying to emails and not committing to meet up.'

Female student

4.9 Students' union services

Students' awareness, use and opinion of student's union services from survey responses

	% male students					% female students
	white	black	Asian	other	all	
Aware of service	50	36	35	52	48	55
Use service	Never				64	56
	Rarely				20	23
	Occasionally				11	15
	Frequently				6	6
Rate service to be excellent or good					55	57
Consider service to have a positive impact					53	63

Overall men were less aware of students' union services than women. However black and Asian men were significantly less likely to be aware of students' union-based support services than white men. Men were ten per cent less likely than women to confirm that students' union services had had a positive impact on them. However, the difference between men and women rating the service as excellent or good was small which could indicate that men's engagement with students' union services was an issue rather than the services themselves.

5 Conclusion

Overall, male students are less aware of the services on offer, less likely to use them, less likely to rate them positively and less likely to assess the impact of using them on their lives to be positive than female students. In many cases, the differences between men and women are relatively small, but they are consistent and systematically reflect more limited male engagement with services.

On the whole, men were more likely to prefer to access services for a straightforward and often impersonal problem and were satisfied with a straightforward and impersonal solution. They were less likely to approach multiple services and more likely to be put off by what they perceived to be obstacles in the way of service access. For some this might have been the requirement for one-to-one interactions, for others it might have been poor initial interactions with frontline service staff or the requirement for form-filling. The process of engaging with services introduced questions of perceived vulnerability that some men found compromising.

Women's reported behaviour patterns around support seeking, the fact that they often engage with multiple services, as well as their apparent persistence in seeking support, mean that they are more likely to find and secure the right kind of support. Women were also less likely to be concerned about being perceived as vulnerable in the process of engaging with services, were more likely to have higher expectations of services, were happier about having their wellbeing 'monitored', and more likely to see services to be facilitating their educational experience and achievements.

These findings strengthen previous research indicating that men struggle with acknowledging issues that they believe might cause them to be perceived as vulnerable, or unable to manage (McGivney, 2004; King *et al*, 2002; Bendelow *et al*, 2001), and can be more reluctant than women to build socially supportive 'bridging ties' (Putnam, 2000) beyond their immediate circle.

Female students are likely to make use of services at an earlier stage than male students and many appear to have a greater propensity to generate constructive concerns about their progress through higher education that are reflected and acted upon. This research confirms that women were more likely to have doubts about their ability to succeed in higher education, despite their being more likely to succeed academically and less likely to withdraw, than men, as noted in previous studies (Foster *et al*, 2012; Woodfield *et al*, 2006). This suggests that women are more aware of the challenges they may face in higher education than men (Foster *et al*, 2012).

It should be emphasised that, although on average men engaged with services less than women, some men used and experienced them in a broadly similar way to women. Variations in service engagement between different subgroups of men were evident for several background characteristics but none were as prominent as the variation between men who undertook fewer than ten hours of study per week and those who undertook more.

Students who study for fewer than ten hours a week – which suggests disengagement from their course – were more likely to consider withdrawing but less engaged with academic and pastoral support. Most students who reported considering withdrawing said that they had done so because of problems associated with their course, most notably workload or assessment pressure or dislike of aspects of the course. There are clear benefits to integrating support services with academic delivery and ensuring that there are clear lines of communication and referral between academic staff and other service providers.

It was outside the remit of this research to follow students longitudinally and map their level of service engagement with academic outcomes, but other research has established links between engagement levels and academic outcomes (Thomas and May, 2011; ECU and HEA, 2008; Woodfield *et al*, 2006; see also Hofman and van der Berg, 2000; Reisberg, 2000; Wintre and Yaffe, 2000). This research has however found good evidence

that most students who engage with academic and pastoral support services assess the impact of doing so positively, and that awareness and use of services increases with academic engagement. The findings of this research can be used to enable men to make greater use of services by diversifying the nature of the services provided and the way in which they are delivered.

Further research would be beneficial to:

- = explore in greater depth the reasons why some men use services so infrequently, and, where they do use services, how and why they use them and with what outcomes
- = develop and evaluate the impact of interventions designed to attract and engage more men
- = gain a deeper understanding of the more disengaged students, and what could engage them and support their educational development
- = follow up with students longitudinally and map their level of service engagement with academic and retention outcomes

6 How can services engage more men?

The data collected by this project provides a better understanding of the services that men appear to be more willing to engage with and the delivery characteristics that engage more men. Recommendations drawn from these findings are supplemented by examples of services or interventions that have attracted an equal or greater number of men than women.

6.1 Data on students' service use

- = Collect, disseminate and analyse data on academic and pastoral service use, including services provided by academic departments such as personal tutor support and participation in co-curricular activities as there is a particular lack of data in these areas.
 - = Consider analysing this data by gender, students' age, course of study, socio-economic status and mode of study.
 - = Reflect upon your findings when designing and delivering services.
-

6.2 Service provision

- = Provide a range of services that take into account a range of behaviours, for example:
 - compulsory participation (eg for all students as part of the core academic curriculum, or for targeted students based on data collection)
 - services that are suitable for students who have not accessed support until their issues have become critical (eg after failing an assessment, or when a personal issue has become severe)
 - emphasising development rather than support
 - having a competitive element, either to participate or as part of the intervention (eg having a limited number of places, framing the intervention around 'leadership', or including competition within the activities)
 - making some of the interventions explicitly geared towards popular male interests such as sport and gaming
- = Recognise the importance of the personal and academic tutor roles in relation to the provision of support and consider developing firm job descriptions and expectations of minimum service levels in relation to this post.

Some service providers confirmed that informal service formats encouraged more men.

'We do get more men coming to our lunches and things that I would see pastorally so I think there probably is a different balance there. So men will come for the free food and a chat and the non-pressured thing but they're not so keen on the idea of a one-to-one.'

Service provider

Social support group

The counselling service at Edge Hill University established a pilot 'social support group', to reach more hard to reach students by offering an alternative to counselling. The group, while initiated and supported by the counselling service, is run and shaped by students. It has a strong social element, and is very distinct from a counselling or therapy group.

'And one of the things that has been particularly successful for me ... is what we've moulded now is a roundtable essentially, a social support group that is self-efficacy based ... the basis is you talk highlights, lowlights, you talk challenges and you talk about successes. And it's in its own organic dimension, it develops its own social network.'

Male student

Many students find out about it from student services staff who promote it to students who may not be fully integrated into the university for a variety of reasons. The group does not use referrals, preferring students to make contact themselves to find out more about the group to see if it might be right for them.

'The element that it is social support may be important in attracting men more easily. It may be that terms such as 'health' and 'well-being' may not be particularly meaningful to male students.'

Head of counselling and supervisory services

The counselling service is currently undertaking research to explore why each of the participants chose to engage with the group. One reason why the group is attractive may be because it is not held in the counselling service, but rather it takes place in a café, reinforcing the social element of the support on offer.

6.3 Communication channels

- = Develop robust and clear communication between academic monitoring, the student and support services to disseminate this information.
- = Examine ways to increase awareness of services that extends beyond the induction period using a range of communication methods.

6.4 Referral

- = Work with academic departments and staff to integrate support into the curriculum, and to increase referrals for students who would benefit from additional support and development.
- = Monitor and track students' participation and attainment in their academic studies and take action when participation or attainment is low, or patterns change substantially.

The research findings pointed to the benefits of having robust systems in place for referring male (and female) students to a service to address reluctance to voluntarily engage with services

If men are less likely to refer themselves, it is important that services have good links with academic staff and others who are in a position to identify students at risk. This can be achieved by integrating academic development and pastoral support into the core academic provision, or by staff proactively referring students to additional services.

'Where academic staff promote our service, it seems to be more successful so it's a teamwork approach to academic support that I'm trying to encourage.'

Service provider

Academic support tutor referral form

Birkbeck College have a referral form for academic writing and development services which is designed to be used by staff when they are marking work. The form aims to encourage students to access the support they need.

Monitoring and referral

The business school at the University of Central Lancashire uses an attendance monitoring system where tutors help to identify students with poor attendance. If attendance is poor in just one module, the student is referred to the module tutor. If attendance is poor in two modules, the referral is to the course leader. If attendance is poor in three or more modules, then the student is referred to the student support team. While attendance does not always reflect performance it tends to be a good indicator of students potentially 'at risk'.

In addition to this formal referral system, students can also come forward themselves requesting help and support. The retention team see around twice as many men as women.

6.5 Service promotion

- = Consider strategies and approaches that make services attractive and reduce sensitivities associated with accessing services that some men experience.
- = Review the language and ways in which services are promoted to communicate a positive perception, minimise the possibility of stigma being associated with services and encourage wider use, for example:
 - academic support could be re-framed as 'development', and designed to enable all students to maximise their success, rather than be oriented towards remediating academic failure
 - pastoral support could be offered as a social network rather than as a professional intervention

Some providers felt that men might use services more if they were aligned with career development and played to a sense of achievement rather than offering support or remedial help.

Learning to lead programme, careers and employability centre

This programme is run by the careers and employability centre at the University of Sussex to work with students at all levels of study to develop leadership skills for the workplace. The programme offered 30 places, and received 120 applications from men and women equally. A selection process was used to get a balance of students from across the institution.

Once students got to know the facilities offered by the careers and employability centre, they tended to return and make good use of the range of services available. The programme resulted in a number of men making effective use of the facilities.

6.6 Location and format

- = Consider the location, timing and accessibility of services and opportunities and their related advertising.

Men appeared to be more encouraged to use services if they were accessible in terms of the location and approachability of the staff concerned. A preference for support being located within the immediate academic unit or school was mentioned frequently. Moreover, the research indicated that students might be more willing to make use of faculty-based services, as they are both more accessible and more relevant to the curriculum that they are studying.

‘Yes, not so much with the [learning development service] now, and I haven’t gone out of my way to use it but there are plenty of things within my own school for academic support. For example, there’s a mentoring scheme. I was mentored in first year and I was a mentor this year.’

Male student

Given the high use of library services among both men and women, libraries would also appear to be an ideal place to site or advertise services.

- = Consider multiple access routes for services.

Men's greater reluctance to engage with personal or one-to-one support personnel does not point straightforwardly to increased use of computer-mediated support. Electronic access may be attractive to some students, but there was little evidence to support the idea that men are particularly attracted to online engagement, or that they use it more effectively. It is true that men were more likely than women to say they used web-based study support 'frequently', but they did not rate its impact more positively. Service-provider interviews did not support a move to providing more direct and individual support online. Where this had been attempted (eg counselling), only limited success was reported.

Male and female students both stressed the importance of prompt email response from tutors. Email contact was sometimes used as a test to see whether it was worth pursuing support in person. The research findings indicate that the approachability of staff delivering services and key points of contact, such as tutors and personal tutors, was significant for students.

6.7 Timing

The fact that male students recognise their need for support later than female students appears to have a significant impact on the effectiveness of male use of services in some cases, and should ideally be built into the planning of a portfolio of services to serve the whole student population. If men are more likely to use services at a later point when issues are more severe, this indicates the need for the availability of suitable services at this stage.

The one-to-one retention service for students at risk of withdrawing

The student learning advisers at Edinburgh Napier University noticed a link between male students aged under 21 who appeared to be reluctant to access academic support or retention-focused guidance and potential increased withdrawal rates from university by men aged under 21. They sought to develop academic skills and guidance provision to attract this demographic of students.

The one-to-one retention service offers impartial and confidential advice to students at risk of withdrawing through pre-booked interviews, email and telephone. The scheme is publicised through an all-student email and on the 'thinking of leaving' webpage on the student portal. The majority of students self-refer, but a small and increasing number are referred by academic staff.

In 2010/11 this service was used by 240 students (49% male, 31% aged 18-20). Compared with academic skills workshops (used by 718 students, 28% male, 1% aged 18-20), which are offered to all students throughout the year, the take-up of the retention service by men and students aged under 21 is very high.

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Equality Challenge Unit

ECU works to further and support equality and diversity for staff and students in higher education across all four nations of the UK, and in further education in Scotland.

ECU works closely with colleges and universities to seek to ensure that staff and students are not unfairly excluded, marginalised or disadvantaged because of age, disability, gender identity, marital or civil partnership status, pregnancy or maternity status, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation, or through any combination of these characteristics or other unfair treatment.

Providing a central source of expertise, research, advice and leadership, we support institutions in building a culture that provides equality of both opportunity and outcome, promotes good relations, values the benefits of diversity and provides a model of equality for the wider UK society.



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